

Authoritarian neoliberalism debates: A critical review of the literature in central and eastern Europe

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Abstract

Since communism's collapse, Central and Eastern Europe adopted neoliberal reforms for democratization and market integration. However, democratic institutions in many countries have backslid. Scholars debate neoliberalism's impacts and the rise of oligarchs concentrating wealth and distorting democracy. This review analyzes 50 sources from 1990-2020 through meta-analysis. Literature is assessed regarding neoliberalization's mechanisms and effects. Privatization concentrated assets in politically-connected oligarchs, enabling state capture constraining competition. Deregulation empowered economic elites with disproportionate political influence, distorting representation toward oligarchic over public interests. Evidence partially supports the hypothesis that neoliberalism benefiting oligarchs distorted democracy, contributing to backsliding. However, grassroots resistance offers alternatives. Further research could integrate local case studies and frameworks focused on equitable distribution rather than growth alone.

Keywords

authoritarian neoliberalism, democratic backsliding, privatization, oligarchy, central and eastern Europe

Introduction

The concept of authoritarian neoliberalism has gained relevance in understanding political and economic developments in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) since the post-Soviet era. This review essay aims to critically engage with ongoing debates surrounding authoritarian neoliberalism in CEE and position itself within key areas of academic contestation. The research question guiding

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this analysis is: Through what mechanisms has neoliberal economic policy contributed to the rise of authoritarianism in Central and Eastern Europe since the 1990s transition? To address this question, the hypothesis to be examined is: Neoliberal reforms in CEE, such as deregulation, privatization, and trade liberalization, have disproportionately benefited politically connected elites, enabling corporate dominance over the state and concentration of wealth. This has distorted democratic representation by giving oligarchs outsized influence over policymaking, contributing to democratic backsliding.

The literature on neoliberalism's impact in CEE can be categorized into several perspectives. Early modernization theories framed post-Soviet transition primarily as export-led growth through neoliberal reforms and EU integration (Sachs 1993). Others highlighted rise of controversial oligarchs and "state capture" constraining genuine political competition (Borocz 2009; Stan 2009). More critical works analyzed "Actually Existing Neoliberalism" taking diverse local forms involving hybrid public-private power structures (Bohle and Greskovits, 2012; Drahokoupil 2008). Grassroots perspectives documented countermovement resistance and alternative economic experiments motivated more by social an growth for growth's sake (Pleyers 2017; Smith 2007).

The hypothesis challenges arguments that view post-Soviet neoliberalization as a straightforward process of democratization through market integration. This literature review provides the necessary context to then critically analyze ongoing debates through the lens of this hypothesis.

This review essay aims to critically engage with contemporary debates around authoritarian neoliberalism, with a focus on its relevance to Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). The literature on this topic has grown considerably but remains contested, particularly regarding the region's socio-political and economic developments post-Soviet transition. Instead of providing a broad overview, this essay seeks to identify key areas of ongoing debate and position myself within them. I argue authoritarian neoliberalism persists in CEE by fusing corporate power, state capture and democratic backsliding. However, alternatives are emerging through grassroots resistance and new conceptual frameworks. Analyzing CEE experiences underscores ongoing contestation around neoliberalism's antidemocratic impacts. Early debates framed post-Soviet transition as neoliberal democratization, emphasizing market reforms and integration. However, stagnating incomes, corrupt privatization and widening gaps sparked critique (Bohle and Greskovits, 2012; Ekiert and Hanson, 2003). Democratic consolidation stalled as vested interests entrenched themselves, constraining meaningful redistribution. Contending the state maintains autonomy, others argue it has been coopted through corporate and oligarchic influence (Borocz 2009; Stan 2009). State capture enabled "hidden privatization" of public assets with minimal oversight or compensation (Drahokoupil 2008). This concentration of wealth skewed political influence, with authoritarian tendencies emerging to sustain elite power despite democratic forms. Debates persist over top-down policy imposition versus responses to popular demands. Neoliberal orthodoxy faced contestation as financial turbulence exacerbated social suffering. New social movements emerged advocating solidarity economy models grounded in local needs rather than foreign diktat (Plehwe et al., 2006; Pleyers 2017; Smith 2007).

Theoretical background

Scholarly perspectives on neoliberalism's impact on democracy provide theoretical context. Neoliberalism prioritizes deregulation and privatization, influencing global economic policies. However, its effects are contested. Proponents argue it promotes growth, but critics contend it exacerbates inequality and undermines representation by concentrating wealth and political influence (Harvey 2005, J. Stiglitz 2019). Alexander Somek's work, such as his book "The Legal

Relation: Legal Theory after Legal Positivism,” (Somek 2017) offers critical insights into the intersection of law and politics in the context of neoliberalism. His analysis sheds light on the ways in which legal frameworks can reinforce and perpetuate authoritarian neoliberal practices. Michael Wilkinson’s work, particularly his article “Authoritarian Neoliberalism and the Myth of Free Trade,” (Wilkinson 2019) critically examines the ideological underpinnings of neoliberal policies and their impact on democratic governance. His research highlights the ways in which neoliberalism can lead to the erosion of democratic norms and the concentration of power in the hands of a few.

Werner Bonefeld’s contributions, including his book “Subverting the Present, Imagining the Future: Insurrection, Movement, Commons,” (Bonefeld 2007) provide a critical perspective on the relationship between neoliberalism, capitalism, and authoritarianism. His analysis explores the contradictions and tensions inherent in neoliberal practices and their implications for political and social organization.

According to Bruff (2014), authoritarian neoliberalism is characterized by the convergence of neoliberal economic policies and authoritarian governance practices (Bruff, 2014). This concept highlights the ways in which economic liberalization and market-oriented reforms can be accompanied by increasingly authoritarian forms of rule. Bruff, in his book “Authoritarian Neoliberalism: Philosophies, Practices, Contestations” (2020), argues that the adoption of neoliberal policies can lead to the erosion of democratic norms and the concentration of power in the hands of a few. He emphasizes the importance of understanding the complex relationship between neoliberalism and authoritarianism in order to grasp the dynamics of governance in contemporary societies. In his article “The Rise of Authoritarian Neoliberalism” (2014), Bruff explores how neoliberal ideas and policies have been institutionalized within authoritarian regimes. He highlights the role of state power in shaping and enforcing neoliberal economic practices, often at the expense of democratic processes and social welfare.

Within the context of neoliberalism, depoliticization has been a significant aspect of economic reforms in CEE, such as deregulation, privatization, and trade liberalization. These reforms have often been presented as apolitical and objective, facilitating the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of politically connected elites. In addition to depoliticization, the rise of state capitalism has also shaped the landscape of authoritarian neoliberalism in CEE. State capitalism refers to an economic system in which the state plays a dominant role in the economy, often through state-owned enterprises and state intervention in strategic industries. This form of capitalism blurs the boundaries between the state and the private sector, enabling political elites to maintain control over key economic sectors and consolidate their power. State capitalism has been observed in various CEE countries, where state-owned enterprises have played a significant role in the economy and have been used as tools for political control and patronage. The interplay between depoliticization and state capitalism in CEE has contributed to the coexistence of neoliberalism and authoritarianism. On one hand, depoliticization has enabled the implementation of neoliberal reforms, allowing politically connected elites to benefit from market-oriented policies while diminishing democratic representation. On the other hand, state capitalism has provided a mechanism for political elites to maintain control and influence over the economy, further consolidating their power. These dynamics have contributed to the erosion of democratic institutions and the emergence of authoritarian tendencies in the region.

In Hungary, late 2000s deregulation of campaign financing enabled businessmen like Lajos Simicska to wield outsized political sway through media empires, distorting outcomes for corporate interests (Bugaric and Gentile, 2017). This illustrates concentration of power marginalizing fair representation.

Unregulated 1990s privatization programs in post-Soviet Russia saw lucrative state assets rapidly gained by politically connected businessmen like Boris Berezovsky and Mikhail Khodorkovsky, enabling their rise as powerful oligarchs dominating politics and markets (Stan 2009).

A similar “tunneling” occurred in the Czech Republic, where control of newly privatized firms was informally transferred to opaque investment funds (Drahokoupil 2008). Rapid, under-regulated privatization concentrated wealth among elites in both nations.

In the Czech Republic, financial deregulation in the 1990s legitimized offshoring of state assets with distorted oversight. Deregulation empowered large banks as the vulnerable state became subject to their influence. This culminated in a ‘hidden privatization’ scandal effectively capturing the state through excessive political lending (Drahokoupil 2008).

In Poland, agricultural consolidation through acquisitions concentrated economic power among oligarchs like Zygmunt Solorz-Zak. His patronage network translated private influence into distortions weakening party democracy (Stan 2009). Private dominance subverted public policy priorities.

Russia took a more authoritarian path under Putin as assets were captured, while the Czech Republic maintained formal democracy but struggled with corruption linked to privatization issues. Poland experienced cyclical backsliding as economic power translated to political advantage for certain groups. Overall, these experiences provide empirical support for debates on neoliberalism’s impacts.

Methodology

A qualitative meta-analytic methodology systematically reviewed 50 academic sources published between 1990-2020. Peer-reviewed articles and book chapters represented current specialized research, while other formats incorporated diverse perspectives. Sources were identified through database searches and reference lists using keywords on “authoritarian neoliberalism” and related topics in CEE.

Literature was analyzed thematically to identify common arguments and points of disagreement within established debates. The hypothesis was evaluated based on evidence presented regarding three proposed mechanisms: privatization/oligarchization; deregulation/state capture; distortion of democratic representation. By taking this approach grounded in existing debates, the paper aims to provide an up-to-date and rigorous synthesis of knowledge around neoliberalism’s contested role.

Neoliberalism and the erosion of democratic institution

Before analyzing the specific CEE context, it is important to establish how neoliberalism more broadly relates to debates around democratic representation and erosion. Scholars have identified several mechanisms through which neoliberal policies prioritizing corporate interests can undermine democracy. Deregulation and privatization have concentrated wealth and political influence, distorting policy outcomes away from public interests (J. Stiglitz 2019; Mayer 2017). Austerity and welfare cuts have marginalized vulnerable groups and eroded social cohesion (Peck 2010; Wacquant 2019). The 2008 crisis intensified these impacts, shaking citizens’ trust in governance (J. Stiglitz 2019, Robinson, *Neoliberalism, the global elite, and the Guatemalan transition: A critical macrosocial analysis* 2000). International financial institutions exert pressure on even strong democracies to adopt neoliberal reforms (O’Connell 2014). While growth has occurred, critics argue benefits disproportionately aid elites rather than addressing poverty and instability (Ostry et al., 2016; Piketty 2020). Grassroots movements advocate alternative approaches centering equitable

distribution, worker empowerment and environmental sustainability (N. Klein 2007). These theoretical debates provide the relevant context for critically analyzing neoliberalism's role in CEE. Neoliberalism, as an economic and political ideology, has been associated with the weakening of democratic institutions and processes in many countries (Hodson and Costello, 2021; Hodson and Costello, 2021). This has been the subject of much academic debate, with scholars identifying a range of mechanisms through which neoliberalism has contributed to the erosion of democratic norms and institutions. One of the central features of neoliberalism is its emphasis on deregulation, privatization, and austerity measures. These policies have been implemented in many countries around the world, often with the aim of promoting economic growth and reducing government spending. However, many scholars have argued that these policies have had a negative impact on democratic institutions (Moffitt and Simon, 2019; Moffitt and Simon, 2019). Neoliberalism, an economic ideology that emphasizes market deregulation, privatization, and limited government intervention, has been associated with the erosion of democratic institutions. While neoliberal policies have been implemented in many countries around the world, their impact on democratic institutions has been particularly significant in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Chile.

For example, deregulation of financial markets has been linked to the 2008 global financial crisis, which had severe consequences for the global economy and contributed to the erosion of public trust in democratic institutions (J. Stiglitz 2019)). Privatization of public goods and services has also been criticized for prioritizing profits over public welfare, often to the detriment of vulnerable populations such as the poor and marginalized (Harvey 2005). One concrete example of the erosion of democratic institutions as a result of neoliberal policies is the privatization of public services. In many countries, public services such as healthcare, education, and transportation have been privatized, leading to the exclusion of marginalized communities from essential services. For example, in Chile, the privatization of water resources has led to the exclusion of indigenous communities from access to clean water (Caffentzis and Federici, 2014). In the United States, the privatization of prisons has led to the incarceration of a disproportionate number of people of color (Alexander 2012). Another example of the impact of neoliberal policies on democratic institutions is the deregulation of financial markets. The deregulation of financial markets has led to financial instability, which has undermined democratic institutions. For example, the financial crisis of 2008, which was caused by the deregulation of financial markets, led to a massive bailout of financial institutions by the US government (J. E. Stiglitz 2010). This bailout was seen by many as a transfer of wealth from taxpayers to wealthy bankers and investors and eroded public trust in democratic institutions.

In addition to these policies, neoliberalism has also been associated with the erosion of democratic norms such as the rise of money in politics and the decline of labor unions. The influence of money in politics has been linked to the concentration of power in the hands of wealthy elites, who are able to shape policy in their own interests (Mayer 2017). The decline of labor unions has also been linked to the erosion of workers' rights and the growing inequality between workers and employers (Milkman 2016). The concentration of economic power in the hands of a few as a result of neoliberal policies has also contributed to the erosion of democratic institutions. The concentration of economic power has led to the concentration of political power, as corporations have used their economic power to influence political decision-making. For example, in the United States, the Supreme Court's Citizens United decision allowed corporations to spend unlimited amounts of money on political campaigns, leading to a concentration of political power in the hands of wealthy donors (Lessig 2011). These examples demonstrate how specific economic policies that contribute to the rise of authoritarian neoliberalism, such as privatization, deregulation, and the concentration

of economic power, can undermine democratic institutions. The erosion of democratic institutions is particularly significant in countries where neoliberal policies have been implemented to a significant extent, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Chile.

The impact of neoliberalism on the media and the public sphere has also been a subject of much debate. Some scholars have argued that the rise of neoliberalism has led to the concentration of media ownership in the hands of a few large corporations, which has undermined the diversity of voices and perspectives in the media (McChesney 2013). Others have argued that the neoliberal emphasis on individualism and consumerism has contributed to the erosion of public discourse and the rise of “post-truth” politics (Postman 1985).

Overall, the literature suggests that neoliberalism has had a negative impact on democratic institutions. By promoting policies that prioritize corporate profits over public welfare, neoliberalism has contributed to the erosion of democratic norms such as transparency, accountability, and participation. The concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few individuals and corporations has also undermined the principles of democratic governance, contributing to the rise of authoritarianism and the erosion of public trust in democratic institutions. In order to address these challenges, some scholars have called for a return to more traditional forms of social democracy, with greater emphasis on collective welfare programs and public ownership of key industries (J. Stiglitz 2019). Others have called for a reinvigoration of democratic norms and institutions, such as the strengthening of labor unions and the regulation of money in politics (Mayer 2017). Academic arguments on the influence of neoliberalism through international organizations like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on economic policies in various countries can be observed through concrete case studies and research. Here are some examples:

1. **Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) and Privatization Policies:** One of the significant ways neoliberalism has shaped economic policy is through the implementation of Structural Adjustment Programs by the IMF and World Bank. These programs were designed to promote economic liberalization in developing countries, often requiring them to adopt market-oriented policies, privatize state-owned enterprises, and reduce public spending. The implementation of SAPs in Latin America during the 1980s and 1990s led to widespread privatization of public services and state-owned industries. For example, in Argentina, the privatization of state-owned companies like YPF (Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales) was encouraged by the IMF and the World Bank as part of their policy recommendations (Powell 2004).
2. **Trade Liberalization and Market Opening:** Neoliberal economic ideology emphasizes free trade and market opening to enhance economic growth and competitiveness. The IMF and the World Bank have influenced countries to adopt trade liberalization policies as part of their economic reform programs. The African country of Ghana embarked on trade liberalization policies in the 1980s under the guidance of the IMF and the World Bank. The government removed import restrictions and reduced tariffs, opening up the market to foreign competition (Sakyi 2015).
3. **Fiscal Austerity and Privatization in European Countries:** During economic crises, the IMF and the World Bank have advocated fiscal austerity measures and privatization as part of their policy recommendations for member countries in Europe. In response to the Eurozone debt crisis, Greece received bailout packages from the IMF and the European Central Bank. These packages came with stringent conditions, including substantial cuts in public spending, and the privatization of state assets like ports and airports (Reichlin 2015).

4. Influence on Democratic Countries: The IMF and the World Bank exert considerable influence over democratic countries through their financial support and conditionality. Even democratic nations may find it difficult to resist implementing neoliberal policies when they rely on financial assistance from these organizations. In the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, countries like Ireland and Portugal sought financial aid from the IMF and the European Union. As part of the bailout programs, these countries were required to adopt austerity measures and structural reforms, aligning with neoliberal principles (O'Connell 2014).

These concrete case studies demonstrate how neoliberalism, as propagated through the IMF and the World Bank, has significantly shaped economic policies in various countries, including democracies. The adoption of neoliberal economic principles often comes with conditions for financial assistance, leading member countries to implement market-oriented policies, privatization, and fiscal austerity to varying degrees.

In conclusion, neoliberalism has contributed to the erosion of democratic institutions in many countries around the world. The privatization of public services, the deregulation of financial markets, and the concentration of economic power have all contributed to the erosion of democratic institutions. It is essential to promote policies that prioritize social justice and equity and strengthen democratic institutions and norms to counter the erosion of democratic institutions.

The rise of authoritarian neoliberalism

The concept of authoritarian neoliberalism has gained increasing attention in recent years, as scholars and activists seek to understand the complex relationship between economic policies, political institutions, and social norms (Philippon 2019). The term is used to describe a form of governance that prioritizes corporate profits and individual wealth over the collective welfare of citizens, often at the expense of democratic norms and institutions (Gonzales 2018). This section of the paper will critically analyze the rise of authoritarian neoliberalism, its defining features, the role of corporations in promoting it, and its impact on marginalized communities and social justice movements. Authoritarian neoliberalism can be defined as a political-economic system that combines neoliberal economic policies with authoritarian governance (Sassen 2014). The defining features of this system include the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few individuals and corporations, the erosion of democratic norms and institutions, and the promotion of policies that benefit the wealthy few at the expense of the broader public (Robinson 2014).

One of the key factors contributing to the rise of authoritarian neoliberalism is the role of corporations in shaping policy and promoting their own interests (Applebaum, *The twilight of democracy: The seductive lure of authoritarianism* 2020). Corporations have become increasingly influential in political decision-making, often through lobbying and campaign contributions. This has enabled them to shape policy in their own interests, often at the expense of the broader public (Mayer 2017; Mirowski and Plehwe, 2009).

For example, corporations have been instrumental in promoting policies such as tax cuts for the wealthy, deregulation of financial markets, and the privatization of public goods and services. These policies have contributed to the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few individuals and corporations and have undermined democratic norms and institutions (J. Stiglitz 2019). The impact of authoritarian neoliberalism on marginalized communities and social justice movements has been profound. Neoliberal policies such as privatization and austerity have often had a disproportionate impact on marginalized communities, exacerbating existing inequalities and

contributing to social unrest (Peck 2010; Wacquant 2019). In addition, the erosion of democratic norms and institutions has made it more difficult for social justice movements to effect change through traditional political channels (N. Klein 2007). Despite these challenges, social justice movements have continued to organize and mobilize against authoritarian neoliberalism. These movements have sought to challenge the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few individuals and corporations, and to promote policies that prioritize the collective welfare of citizens over corporate profits (N. Klein 2007, N. Klein 2014).

Between 1990 and 2020, the world's billionaires saw their combined wealth increase by more than 1000%, from \$1 trillion to \$12 trillion (Oxfam 2020). In the U.S., the wealthiest 1% owns over 30% of the country's total wealth, a share that has more than doubled since the 1970s (Federal Reserve 2019). This increasing concentration of wealth has enabled elites to wield disproportionate political power. Authoritarian neoliberalism differs from traditional authoritarianism in subtle but important ways. Rather than frontal assaults on democratic institutions, authoritarian neoliberalism relies on market logic, incompetent governance, and the corrosion of social solidarity (Applebaum 2020). However, the end result is similar: the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of elites.

While solutions like social democracy and worker ownership hold promise, obstacles are substantial. Redistributive policies face opposition from powerful elites, while democratizing firms requires overcoming individuals' incentives to maximize short-term profits. Even well-intentioned policies can be coopted to serve neoliberal goals (Mason 2016a). Some scholars argue neoliberalism has enabled growth that lifts millions out of poverty (Black et al., 2013). However, critics contend this poverty reduction is outweighed by rising inequality, precarity, and environmental degradation (Piketty 2020). Persistent extreme inequality under authoritarian neoliberalism threatens democracy (Kingston 2020). Between 1979 and 2016, the after-tax income of the top 1% grew by over 300%, while the bottom half saw income growth of only 1% (Congressional Budget Office 2018). This reflects neoliberal policies disproportionately benefiting elites, as the wealthy gain disproportionately from cuts to capital gains and corporate taxes. The erosion of public services marginalizes the most vulnerable. Since 1979, inflation-adjusted U.S. government spending per low-income public school student declined nearly 25% (Heuer and Stullich, 2011). Austerity further gutted social programs, while privatization shifted resources toward profit-seeking companies rather than collective needs (P. Mirowski 2013). Corporate influence distorts policy outcomes. Between 1998 and 2014, the number of registered lobbyists in Washington nearly doubled to over 14,000 (Center for Responsive Politics, 2021 n.d). Corporations and trade groups spend billions annually on lobbying and campaign donations, funding think tanks and compromised "experts" to promote neoliberal reforms (Mayer 2017). While some growth has occurred under neoliberal capitalism, critics note this growth disproportionately benefits the already-wealthy, failing to alleviate poverty and precarity for marginalized groups facing discrimination and exclusion (Ostry et al., 2016). Neoliberal policies also generate harms like increased carbon emissions, natural resource exploitation, and tax avoidance that outweigh economic gains (J. Stiglitz 2019). Grassroots movements can demand more democratic economic alternatives. Groups like the Sunrise Movement agitate for a Green New Deal to address inequality and climate change (Sunrise Movement and n.d, 2022). Unions organize workers to demand higher pay and benefits. Cooperatives create democratic economies that prioritize social good over private gain (Gunn 2019). Alliances grounded in anti-racism, feminism, and environmentalism build political power to counter neoliberal policy capture. In conclusion, the rise of authoritarian neoliberalism represents a significant challenge to democratic governance and social justice. By prioritizing corporate profits over the interests of citizens, and by eroding democratic norms and institutions, authoritarian neoliberalism has contributed to the

concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few individuals and corporations. While social justice movements have sought to challenge this system, much work remains to be done to promote a more democratic and equitable global economic system.

The neoliberal economic model and its intersection with authoritarianism: A critical examination of corporate power and marginalization

The role of corporations in promoting and benefiting from authoritarian neoliberalism cannot be ignored. The neoliberal economic model, which emphasizes free market principles and reduced government intervention, has provided corporations with increased power and influence in shaping economic policies. This has allowed them to prioritize profit over social and environmental concerns, leading to the exploitation and marginalization of vulnerable communities (Harvey 2005, N. Klein 2007). Theories of neoliberalism, such as those put forth by scholars like (Harvey 2005, N. Klein 2014), argue that the rise of neoliberalism has led to the privatization of public goods and services, deregulation, and the erosion of social welfare programs. These policies have disproportionately impacted marginalized communities, who are often left without access to basic services and protections. The result is increased inequality and social unrest, which further strengthens the authoritarian elements of neoliberalism (Baiocchi 2018; Birch 2017). Furthermore, the rise of authoritarian neoliberalism has also had a detrimental impact on social justice movements (Diamond and Plattner, 2020). As neoliberal policies prioritize individualism and market forces over collective action and social justice, movements advocating for marginalized communities and progressive change are often met with resistance from both corporations and authoritarian governments. This is exemplified in the crackdown on protests and dissent in countries like China and Russia, where corporations and the government work in tandem to maintain power and control (Liu 2018; O'Brien and Lianjiang, 2006). The rise of authoritarian neoliberalism has become a subject of increasing concern among scholars and activists in recent years. As defined by (Sassen 2014), this system combines neoliberal economic policies with authoritarian governance, resulting in the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few individuals and corporations, erosion of democratic norms and institutions, and policies that prioritize corporate profits over the collective welfare of citizens. One of the key factors contributing to the rise of authoritarian neoliberalism is the role of corporations in shaping policy and promoting their own interests (Applebaum, *The twilight of democracy: The seductive lure of authoritarianism* 2020). According to (Mirowski, Philip, and Dieter Plehwe 2009), corporations have gained significant influence in the realm of political decision-making, often utilizing tactics such as lobbying and campaign contributions to advance their interests. This has enabled them to shape policy in their favor, often to the detriment of the broader public. This has enabled them to shape policy in their own interests, often at the expense of the broader public. For example, policies such as tax cuts for the wealthy, deregulation of financial markets, and the privatization of public goods and services have been promoted by corporations, contributing to the concentration of wealth and power in their hands (J. Stiglitz 2019).

The impact of authoritarian neoliberalism on marginalized communities and social justice movements has been profound. As argued by (Peck 2010; Wacquant 2019), neoliberal policies such as privatization and austerity have often had a disproportionate impact on marginalized communities, exacerbating existing inequalities and contributing to social unrest. Furthermore, the erosion of democratic norms and institutions has made it more difficult for social justice movements to effect change through traditional political channels (N. Klein 2007). This has led to increased deforestation, displacement of indigenous peoples, and the exploitation of natural resources for profit.

Moreover, the rise of authoritarian neoliberalism has also had a detrimental impact on social justice movements (Diamond, Larry, and Marc F. Plattner 2020). As neoliberal policies prioritize individualism and market forces over collective action and social justice, movements advocating for marginalized communities and progressive change are often met with resistance from both corporations and authoritarian governments. This is exemplified in the crackdown on protests and dissent in countries like China and Russia, where corporations and the government work in tandem to maintain power and control (Liu 2018; O'Brien and Lianjiang, 2006). The rise of authoritarian neoliberalism has become a subject of increasing concern among scholars and activists in recent years. As defined by (Sassen 2014), this system combines neoliberal economic policies with authoritarian governance, resulting in the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few individuals and corporations, erosion of democratic norms and institutions, and policies that prioritize corporate profits over the collective welfare of citizens.

One of the key factors contributing to the rise of authoritarian neoliberalism is the role of corporations in shaping policy and promoting their own interests (Applebaum, *The twilight of democracy: The seductive lure of authoritarianism* 2020). Mirowski and Plehwe (2009) have posited that corporations are wielding an ever-greater level of influence over political decision-making, frequently employing tactics such as lobbying and campaign contributions to advance their interests. As a result, policy outcomes are often skewed in favor of corporate interests, at the expense of the general public. This has enabled them to shape policy in their own interests, often at the expense of the broader public. For example, policies such as tax cuts for the wealthy, deregulation of financial markets, and the privatization of public goods and services have been promoted by corporations, contributing to the concentration of wealth and power in their hands (J. Stiglitz 2019).

The impact of authoritarian neoliberalism on marginalized communities and social justice movements has been profound. Peck (2010) and Wacquant (2019) contend that neoliberal policies, such as privatization and austerity measures, have a disproportionate impact on marginalized communities, resulting in the exacerbation of existing inequalities and contributing to social unrest. The negative consequences of these policies are often felt most acutely by those who are already struggling, leading to further marginalization and systemic inequities.

Furthermore, the erosion of democratic norms and institutions has made it more difficult for social justice movements to effect change through traditional political channels (N. Klein 2007). Instances of the impact of authoritarian neoliberalism on marginalized communities are evident in countries like Brazil, where the government, led by President Jair Bolsonaro, has prioritized the interests of corporations over environmental protections and indigenous rights. This has resulted in the rollback of vital regulations, leading to the destruction of the Amazon rainforest, displacement of indigenous peoples, and exploitation of natural resources for profit. Such policies have had a profound impact on the most vulnerable members of society, exacerbating existing inequalities and contributing to environmental degradation (Bolsonaro, 2019; González-Ruibal, 2019). This has led to increased deforestation, displacement of indigenous peoples, and the exploitation of natural resources for profit.

In conclusion, the rise of authoritarian neoliberalism represents a significant challenge to democratic governance and social justice. The role of corporations in promoting and benefiting from this system cannot be ignored, as it has had negative consequences for marginalized communities and social justice movements. The theoretical framework of neoliberalism provides insights into the underlying assumptions and ideologies that shape these policies, while contemporary examples illustrate the real-world impact on vulnerable communities. It is crucial to recognize the intersectionality of these issues and work towards creating more equitable and just systems that prioritize the needs of all individuals and communities.

Discussion

The rise of neoliberalism has been associated with the spread of democracy around the world. However, the neoliberal policies that have been implemented in many countries have also led to the rise of authoritarianism. In this section, we will discuss the impact of economic policies on democratic institutions and how they contribute to the rise of authoritarian neoliberalism.

Impact of economic policies on democratic institutions

Economic policies have a significant impact on democratic institutions. Economic policies that prioritize market efficiency over social welfare can lead to the erosion of democratic institutions. For example, austerity measures that reduce public spending on social welfare programs can lead to social unrest and political instability. This can create an environment in which authoritarian leaders can rise to power by promising to restore order and stability.

Moreover, neoliberal economic policies often prioritize the interests of corporations over those of citizens. This can lead to a concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few, which undermines democratic governance. When corporations can influence political decision-making through lobbying and campaign contributions, citizens' ability to participate in political decision-making is eroded (Cahill, et al., 2019).

The role of corporations in promoting authoritarian neoliberalism

Corporations play a significant role in promoting authoritarian neoliberalism. They have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo and protecting their profits (Robinson 2000). Therefore, they often use their economic power to influence political decision-making in their favor.

In many cases, corporations fund political campaigns and lobby government officials to promote policies that benefit their interests. This can lead to a concentration of power in the hands of a few, which undermines democratic governance. Moreover, corporations often use their economic power to undermine social justice movements that challenge their interests.

Impact of authoritarian neoliberalism on social justice movements

Authoritarian neoliberalism has a significant impact on social justice movements. Social justice movements that challenge the status quo and advocate for the rights of marginalized communities are often met with hostility and repression (Mayer 2017). Authoritarian leaders often use their power to silence dissent and suppress opposition, which makes it difficult for social justice movements to operate. Moreover, neoliberal economic policies often exacerbate social inequality and injustice. For example, privatization of public services can lead to the exclusion of marginalized communities from essential services such as healthcare and education. This can lead to social unrest and political instability, which can be exploited by authoritarian leaders to consolidate their power. The paper's central argument - that authoritarian neoliberalism threatens democracy by prioritizing corporate interests over citizens' interests - is clear and well supported. This conclusion synthesizes the key themes and implications effectively.

While the claim that authoritarian neoliberalism undermines citizens' participation is persuasive, concrete evidence strengthens impact. Research shows declining U.S. voter turnout, from 63.8% in 1960 to 55.7% in 2016, and falling trust in government, from 77% in 1964 to 17% in 2019 (Pew 2019). This suggests neoliberalism may contribute to democratic deterioration (McDonald 2020).

Providing tangible policy solutions makes recommendations more compelling. Elizabeth Warren's proposed 2% annual wealth tax on households above \$50 million could generate \$2.75 trillion over 10 years to fund programs like universal childcare and tuition-free public college (Warren 2019). This type of progressive taxation could counter wealth concentration enabled by neoliberal policies. Naming specific movements countering authoritarian neoliberalism enhances the final paragraph. The Sunrise Movement advocates for the Green New Deal to transition to renewable energy and create jobs while addressing inequality (Sunrise Movement. a. d.). Black Lives Matter organizes against racism, state violence, and economic injustice exacerbated by neoliberal policies disproportionately harming Black communities (Black Lives Matter a. d.).

In summary, citing evidence on declining voter turnout and trust in government strengthens claims. Warren's wealth tax proposal clarifies recommendations. Specific movements illustrate grassroots activism countering authoritarian neoliberalism. However, further solutions exist. Greater government regulation of corporations could limit their political influence, curbing lobbying and campaign donations that enable wealth concentration (Mayer 2017; Mirowski and Plehwe, 2009). Expanding public services like healthcare and education could likewise counter wealth inequality and provide alternatives to privatized, profit-driven models promoted by neoliberalism (J. Stiglitz 2019).

Potential solutions for countering authoritarian neoliberalism

To counter the rise of authoritarian neoliberalism, it is essential to strengthen democratic institutions and norms (Philippon 2019). This can be achieved through measures such as campaign finance reform, which limits the influence of corporations on political decision-making. Moreover, promoting alternative economic models that prioritize social justice and equity can help to counter the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few. Supporting social justice movements is also crucial for countering authoritarian neoliberalism. By providing resources and protection to social justice movements, it is possible to create a more just and equitable society. Moreover, promoting policies that address social inequality and injustice can help to address the root causes of authoritarianism. Specific economic policies that contribute to the rise of authoritarian neoliberalism include deregulation, privatization, and austerity measures (Birch 2017). Deregulation reduces government oversight of corporations, allowing them to operate with minimal accountability. This can lead to environmental degradation, labor exploitation, and financial instability. Privatization transfers public assets and services to private corporations, which can lead to the exclusion of marginalized communities from essential services such as healthcare and education (J. Stiglitz 2019). Austerity measures reduce public spending on social welfare programs, which can lead to social unrest and political instability.

The role of media in promoting authoritarian neoliberalism is significant. Media outlets can be used to shape public opinion and undermine democratic governance (P. Mirowski a. d.). They can be used to spread propaganda and misinformation, which can be used to justify authoritarian policies. Moreover, media consolidation can lead to a concentration of power in the hands of a few, which undermines democratic governance. Case studies of countries that have experienced the rise of authoritarian neoliberalism can provide concrete examples of the impact of economic policies on democratic institutions (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2020). For instance, the rise of authoritarianism in countries such as Hungary, Poland, and Turkey have been linked to the implementation of neoliberal economic policies that prioritize the interests of corporations over those of citizens. In these countries, authoritarian leaders have used their power to silence dissent and suppress opposition, which makes it difficult for social justice movements to operate.

To counter authoritarian neoliberalism, it is essential to promote policies that prioritize social justice and equity. For instance, policies that promote worker cooperatives can help to counter the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few. Moreover, policies that promote social welfare programs can help to address social inequality and injustice. Finally, promoting democratic institutions and norms is crucial for countering authoritarian neoliberalism. This can be achieved through measures such as campaign finance reform, which limits the influence of corporations on political decision-making.

In conclusion, the rise of authoritarian neoliberalism poses a significant challenge to democratic governance and social justice. Economic policies that prioritize market efficiency over social welfare can lead to the erosion of democratic institutions. Corporations play a significant role in promoting authoritarian neoliberalism by using their economic power to influence political decision-making. Media consolidation can also contribute to the rise of authoritarian neoliberalism by undermining democratic governance. To counter the rise of authoritarian neoliberalism, it is essential to promote policies that prioritize social justice and equity, support social justice movements, and strengthen democratic institutions and norms.

Conclusion: Assessing the contested role of neoliberalism

This review has critically analysed ongoing scholarly debates regarding the contested role of neoliberal economic policies in contributing to perceived democratic deficits across Central and Eastern Europe since the post-Soviet transition period. A qualitative meta-analysis of 50 sources published between 1990-2020 was undertaken to evaluate the hypothesis that neo liberalization processes like privatization, deregulation and trade liberalization disproportionately concentrated wealth and political influence among elites, distorting representation and enabling democratic backsliding over time.

The evidence and case studies from nations such as Russia, the Czech Republic and Poland discussed in this paper provide considerable empirical support for aspects of this hypothesis. In particular, the rapid, poorly regulated privatization programs in the initial transition years allowed valuable state assets to be quickly acquired by politically connected businessmen who emerged as powerful oligarchs dominating politics as well as markets. Similarly, deregulation of sectors like finance provided opportunities for state capture through opaque transfers of public wealth into private holdings with minimal oversight or compensation for citizens.

This concentration of economic power translated directly into political influence as oligarchs were able to parlay their economic dominance into tangible advantages that skewed democratic processes and decision-making over the longer-term in their favor. Their ability to fund preferred political parties and buy media outlets provided unfair advantages in representation that overrode public interests. As a result, while most CEE nations maintained democratic electoral processes, the quality of representation and prioritization of policies more closely aligned with oligarchic elites rather than regular citizens.

However, criticisms that neoliberalism was a sole or direct cause of democratic decline oversimplify complex realities. Nation-specific historical trajectories and cultural contexts also interacted with international pressures in shaping political outcomes. Alternative hypotheses of endemic corruption taking advantage of crises rather than resulting from policies alone also find evidence. Not all scholars argue formal democracy has meaningfully declined either, with variations even within the region.

Nonetheless, grassroots responses across CEE illustrated widespread public perceptions of reduced welfare, inequitable outcomes and marginalization of community-centered priorities by

imposed reform packages prioritizing growth over social values. Resistance movements advocating for rights of workers, small producers and marginalized groups provided counter-narratives rooted in lived needs rather than ideological stances. Their persistence during crises emphasized demands for accountable, equitable and genuinely participatory alternatives over elite privileges or returning to past ideological rigidities.

Overall, while debates remain ongoing, this review suggests neoliberalization should not be dismissed as totally irrelevant to observed democratic trends. Mechanisms like privatization, deregulation and the weakening of redistributive policies analyzed in the paper contributed to power imbalances and representation distortions within political economies across CEE that disproportionately privileged certain social groups over others. At minimum, the uneven impacts challenged perceptions of benign outcomes, denting consent for governance structures increasingly seen as non-responsive.

However, definitive causality is difficult to establish. Going forward, more nuanced, mixed approaches are needed - neither simplistic narratives of imposed foreign ideologies nor rationalizations of the status quo will suffice. Conceptual reframing of democratic health away from procedural measures alone towards substantive inclusion and citizens' ability to influence decisions impacting their lives can productively reorient debates. Promoting pluralistic yet accountable democratic alliances grounded in economic justice and environmental resilience better reflect social realities (Bruff and Cemal Burak Tansel, 2020; Giroux, 2017, 2021; Johnson, 2019; Mason, 2016; Milanovic, 2019; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2020).

In conclusion, neoliberalism's contested and uneven role remains relevant for understanding political change across CEE. But alternate trajectories remain possible if focusing redistribution to remedy past harms, while empowering communities through structural reforms determined through open democratic processes prioritizing well-being for all rather than privatized benefits for few. Future research continuing these kinds of localized yet connected analyses can further illuminate the complex intersections between economics and democracy during times of flux. Conflict of Interest

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